**National Parks – In the Beginning**

National Geographic

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The national parks have been woven into the fabric of American life for so many generations that it’s hard to imagine the nation without them.

But the decision to set these special places aside was not an obvious, or easy, one. No road map existed for the journey that created the national parks because no places quite like them existed anywhere in the world.

The parks were born because in the mid-1800s a relatively small group of people had a vision—what writer Wallace Stegner has called “the best idea we ever had”—to make sure that America’s greatest natural treasures would belong to everyone and remain preserved forever.

“Americans developed a national pride of the natural wonders in this nation and they believed that they rivaled the great castles and cathedrals of Europe,” explains David Barna, National Park Service Chief of Public Affairs.

**Early Efforts**

[Yosemite](http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/national-parks/yosemite-national-park/) was at the heart of America’s nascent national parks movement. The California valley’s splendor inspired some of its earliest European visitors to demand protection, even as settlers moved ceaselessly westward, “civilizing” the West and displacing native peoples.

Elegant voices, like that of naturalist John Muir, brought the grandeur of such lands to those who had never seen them. His prolific and widely published writings stressed how such wild places were necessary for the soul, and his advocacy later became the driving force behind the creation of several national parks.

Responding to such calls, Congress and President Abraham Lincoln put Yosemite under the protection of California during the Civil War. In 1872 Lincoln’s former general, President Ulysses S. Grant, made [Yellowstone](http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/national-parks/yellowstone-national-park/) America’s—and the world’s—first truly national park. More parks soon followed suit and, beginning in the late 19th century, cultural sites like Arizona’s prehistoric Casa Grande were honored as well.

President Theodore Roosevelt was one of the park system’s greatest patrons. During his administration (1901-09) five new parks were created, as well as 18 national monuments, four national game refuges, 51 bird sanctuaries, and over 100 million acres (40 million hectares) of national forest.

**Unmanaged Treasures**

But even as the number of parks swelled no central organization existed to manage them. Consequently, many lacked protection and funding. In the early 20th century the future character of the parks remained very much in doubt.

Private commercial interests, including hotels, railroads, ranches, and sawmills, saw great profit potential in the parks and began to exploit their resources—often relatively unchecked.

Some in government, like forester Gifford Pinchot, shared a utilitarian vision for the parks that included more than preservation. Pinchot and others suggested that the parks become part of a Forest Service that would promote the well-managed use of their timber and other resources to serve “the greatest good for the greatest number.” This philosophy led to the damming, in 1913, of Yosemite’s Hetch Hetchey Valley for the San Francisco water supply.

**Birth of the National Park Service**

But others preached preservation and lamented the lack of an overarching federal management that could make this possible. In 1915 a millionaire industrialist named Stephen Mather began a crusade to establish a distinct National Park Service dedicated to the preservation ideal. Mather garnered support from titans of industry, as well as schoolchildren, newspapers, and even the National Geographic Society. ([See more about National Geographic and the national parks](http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/national-parks/society-history/).)

His efforts succeeded, and when the National Park Service was created in 1916, Mather became its first director and began work with a mandate to protect the parks “unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations,” and to promote their use by all people.

Sacrifices were made as the system grew to include today’s 392 national parks, monuments, battlefields, seashores, recreation areas, and other areas. Many native peoples were displaced and, when eastern parks like Shenandoah were created, so were settlements of U.S. citizens.

But in the final analysis, America’s system of national parks became a unique triumph—and one that carries with it a great responsibility.

“Never in its 200 years has this nation needed the National Park System more,” Barna says. “It stands as a collective memory of where we have been, what sacrifices we have made to get here, and who we mean to be. By investing in the preservation, interpretation, and restoration of these symbolic places, we offer hope and optimism to each generation of Americans.”